

APR IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM – FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q. What is the APR Improvement Program?

- A. The APR Improvement Program (AIP) is a program that provides business planning, technical assistance and grants to active commercial farms with land that has already been protected through the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources' Agricultural Preservation Restriction (APR) Program. The purpose of AIP is to help participating farms stay profitable and keep APR land in active agricultural use.

Q. Who is eligible to apply to the Program?

- A. Eligible responders must be operators of farmland that has been protected through funding from the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources' Agricultural Preservation Restriction (APR) Program for at least the past 3 years and have been actively farming this APR property for at least the past 3 years. Farms owned by non-profit organizations are ineligible for this Program. Specific eligibility requirements may vary from year to year and can be found during open application periods in the Request for Response for the APR Improvement Program at <http://www.mass.gov/eea/agencies/agr/about/divisions/aip.html>

Q. Am I eligible to apply to the Program if I don't own the APR property that I am farming?

- A. If have been a farm manager or operator on an APR farm for at least 3 years, but do not own the farm, you may co-apply with the landowner. Signatures of both the owner(s) and the operator should be on the application.

Q. Am I eligible to apply if I have already participated and received grant funding from the Farm Viability Enhancement Program (FVEP)?

- A. If you have already participated in FVEP and your covenant has expired, you may apply to AIP. However, your application will receive a lower ranking in the selection process than APR farms that have not received FVEP assistance and grant funding from the Department.

Q. How are applications reviewed and selected?

- A. The AIP review committee reviews each eligible application based on a predetermined set of selection criteria that are listed in the current Request for Response. Those applications that best meet these criteria will receive the highest ratings for selection.

Q. How does the Program work?

- A. If selected for Phase I of the program, a team is organized for the participating farm comprised of professionals from various disciplines which may include agriculture, marketing, finance, management, engineering or environmental sciences. Following an assessment of the farm's financial records, management practices, buildings, and natural resources, the team makes recommendations for improving the viability of the farm. The recommendations are prioritized with the farmer and written into a business plan for the farm. If planned use of funds meet Program objectives and the farm moves to Phase II, eligible farmers receive a grant from the Department to implement improvements identified in the plan.

Q. What if I already have a business plan for my farm?

- A. The business planning process may be abbreviated if the farm has a recently completed a full business plan. However, participating farmers must still go through Phase I of the Program in which technical assistance is provided and a business plan update or enterprise plan is developed in order to help the farmer identify the best use of funds to improve the viability of the farm while meeting Program objectives.

Q. How much money is available to farmers that are selected to participate in the Program?

- A. Technical assistance and the development of a business plan are provided at no cost to the farmer. Farmers who participate in completing a plan and then move to Phase II may be eligible for a grant award of either up to \$25,000; up to \$50,000; or up to \$75,000, depending on factors including the number of acres under APR, gross revenues of the farm, and needs identified in the business plan. The provision of grants is dependent upon available funding each year and award levels are determined at the end of Phase I planning.

Q. What can AIP grant funds be used for?

AIP grant funds must be spent primarily on approved infrastructure improvements to the land resource or farm outbuildings that will support or enhance the farm property. Some examples of eligible resource improvements include reseeding hay fields, reclaiming pastureland, establishing orchards and other perennial crops, improving drainage, or installing irrigation or fencing. Funds may also be used for new or improved farm outbuildings, such as a processing facility, livestock housing, storage barn or farmstand.

Q. What is the timeline for the Program, and when do participating farms receive the grant funding?

- A. The open application period for AIP occurs on an annual basis, with the Request for Response and application typically available in early April and due in June. Applications submitted to AIP by the due date are reviewed over the summer and farmers are notified in the fall as to whether or not they have been accepted into the Program. Business planning and technical assistance for participating farms typically begins in November and takes 4 to 5 months. Eligible farms that sign contracts with the Department will receive grants by late spring or early summer after they are accepted into the Program.

Q. How do I apply to the Program?

- A. A Request for Response containing an application to the program may be found on the program web page <http://www.mass.gov/eea/agencies/agr/about/divisions/aip.html> during open application periods, which are typically April to June each year, dependent upon available funding. Potential responders should read the Request for Response thoroughly, as the content including eligibility requirements and due date may vary from year to year, and mail in a completed application by the due date provided. Copies of applications may also be obtained by contacting the APR Improvement Program at (413) 268-8269 or Melissa.AdamsAIP@gmail.com